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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 ALGIERS 000739

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SUBJECT: BOUTEFLIKA SAYS HE WANTS BETTER U.S. TIES

Classified By: CDA Thomas F. Daughton; reasons 1.4 (b, d).

11. (S) SUMMARY: During the Ambassador's farewell call June 24, a reasonably healthy-looking President Abdelaziz Bouteflika wistfully wondered why American relations with Algeria couldn't be more like those the U.S. enjoys with Morocco and Tunisia. The Ambassador noted that as Algeria opened up more politically and economically, the U.S. was engaging more. However, weak Algerian administrative capacity limited what we and our private sector could do with the Algerians. When Bouteflika hinted that he would like to see more senior American visitors in Algeria, the Ambassador observed that the U.S. does not judge the quality of a relationship on the basis of visits but rather of concrete cooperation. In addition, the Algerians have not tried to send any high-level delegations to the U.S. Bouteflika bemoaned the failure to sell night-vision goggles to the Algerian military and the Ambassador reminded him that the end-user verification issue had to be resolved first. Bouteflika sighed that moving the Algerian generals would take time. Bouteflika thanked the U.S. for our efforts to improve education in Algeria, especially English teaching. He agreed to the Ambassador's request that Algeria accept some detainees back from Guantanamo Bay, clearing the way for another attempt which may or may not succeed. Bouteflika was less flexible on the issue of pressuring evangelical Christian groups here, calling it a major security issue. He said local officials and the evangelicals need to have a better dialogue as a start. As we think about how to advance bilateral relations during the rest of the Bouteflika government -- however long that is -- we need to recognize that this government is keenly risk-averse and lacks vision. We should work with those government officials and private Algerians who are trying to advance reform in their small ways. When the issue is urgent and really important, we need to by-pass the usually unhelpful Algerian bureaucracy and make high-level representations to Bouteflika himself since he genuinely appears to want closer bilateral relations. Discussions on Iran and Western Sahara reported septels. END SUMMARY.

BOUTEFLIKA WISHES FOR VISITS

12. (C) President Bouteflika told the departing Ambassador June 24 that Algeria wanted better relations but he felt that the U.S. hadn't tried very hard. He wondered why bilateral relations could not be more like those the U.S. enjoyed with Morocco and Tunisia, although he then readily acknowledged our history with those two states had been different back to the 1960s. The Ambassador told Bouteflika that the U.S. perceived that relations in many areas were improving, including cooperation in fields such as fighting terrorism, education, judicial reform, parliamentary reform, banking and tax administration reform and increased business. The Ambassador noted that we had proposed additional programs in all these areas, but the Algerian administrative capacity was

limited and there were obvious limits to what we, or our companies, could do in the current climate. Bouteflika acknowledged the greater activity in the relationship, but he wanted more. Sensing that what Bouteflika really meant was a high-level visit, the Ambassador told Bouteflika directly that while we understood the utility of senior visits, the U.S. also measured the quality of a relationship by the cooperation between the states and the resources the two sides put into it. Bouteflika immediately perked up and said that in Algerian culture, high-level visits were an important indication of the importance given to a particular country. The Ambassador noted that the President and the Secretary were spending copious amounts of time trying to advance the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations and this left less time for visits to other countries in the region. Bouteflika also acknowledged this point. The Ambassador added that while there have not been high-level visitors from the U.S., neither have the Algerians sent delegations to Washington, and Bouteflika acknowledged this as well. (Comment: It is no accident that MFA Secretary General -- the number two at the foreign ministry -- volunteered to the Ambassador on June 25 that Algeria should be more proactive in sending high-level visitors to Washington. End Comment.)

AND MILITARY EQUIPMENT

13. (S) Bouteflika then threw out another complaint: the U.S. had refused to share advanced reconnaissance equipment such as infra-red vision equipment with the Algerian military. Bouteflika said this was hard to understand, as we both face a common threat from Islamist extremists returning from

ALGIERS 00000739 002 OF 003

places like Afghanistan and Iraq. Moreover, the U.S. was going much farther with Morocco, preparing to sell F-16s there. Ambassador rejoined that we had repeatedly stressed our willingness to consider sales of vision equipment. However, Algeria had to accept the same end-user verifications that other military sales recipients accepted; we had sent multiple teams here to discuss this. Bouteflika clearly knew the issue. The problem, he acknowledged, was that even if the verifications were a mere bureaucratic process for the Americans, as a result of the bitter independence war against France the Algerian military was very sensitive about allowing any foreign state leverage over its equipment. The generals will be hard to budge, he observed. (Comment: It was clear from his comment that Bouteflika didn't think he could budge them. End Comment.) Bouteflika concluded that the U.S. should be patient while the Algerian military's thinking slowly evolves. If there were additional inducements the U.S. could provide (he named nothing specific and said specifically he didn't mean money) that might help shake a change in the Algerian army's thinking.

EDUCATION - A THANK YOU

14. (U) Bouteflika noted that he knew the U.S. was putting more effort into education programs here and he appreciated it. He said Algeria needed to have more people able to do business in English. U.S. engagement in Algerian education was very welcome, he stated. (Comment: The MFA Secretary General highlighted this enhanced work on education as a major advance in relations during his conversation with the Ambassador June 25. End Comment.)

GTMO - POSSIBLE MOVEMENT

15. (S) The Ambassador said there were issues troubling us as well. He noted that we wanted to move forward on closing Guantanamo, but the disposition of Algerian prisoners was a problem for us. We had been ready to return a small group in August 2007 and the Algerians at the last moment had stopped

the transfer. Since then, while we have indicated our willingness to be flexible on how the transfer is undertaken, the GoA has refused even to talk to us. Bouteflika asked if we were sure the detainees were Algerian and Ambassador stressed that they were. In a rambling commentary, Bouteflika said that if the U.S. was still holding these Algerians they must be dangerous men. They might pose a security problem for Algeria, and Algeria already has enough security problems, he observed. Bouteflika said the transfer of the group from last year should be allowed to go forward, but the Americans could help Algeria by sharing what it knows about the individuals so that the Algerians understand what they have to deal with. (Comment: Later that evening, a senior Algerian security official telephoned to start working out details of a transfer. It is still too early to say this will work smoothly, but it is the most movement we have seen in ten months. End Comment.)

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM - TOUGH LINE

16. (C) The Ambassador raised also the issue of the Christian community in Algeria and the damage to Algeria's reputation as a tolerant society from some of the actions taken against Christians. He pointed to the recent letter from a group of members of Congress to Bouteflika about the issue. The Ambassador noted that we were not telling Christian groups to disobey Algerian law, but if the Algerian government insisted on groups registering for approval for their activities, the government should not just automatically refuse requests. Bouteflika said that the Algerian government had no problem with the Catholic or Protestant churches: it knew them and their activities were fine. He had sharper words for Evangelicals who, he said, were causing political and security problems, especially in the Kabylie region. The Ambassador asked what Bouteflika meant by political problems, and in a rambling response Bouteflika indicated that major efforts to convert Algerian Muslims recalled French colonial practices and provoked Islamist extremist responses. He underlined again that above all he considered the Evangelical issue to be a security problem. Bouteflika said that there needed to be more of a dialogue with the Evangelicals and that the U.S. should encourage Evangelical groups in Algeria to seek out local officials and discuss how they could conduct their activities legally.

COMMENT

ALGIERS 00000739 003 OF 003

17. (C) Bouteflika always speaks softly, but he was animated and in apparently good spirits. His complaints were a rehash of what we heard in March during the visit of A/S Welch from either Bouteflika or then-Prime Minister Belkhadem. Interestingly, however, Bouteflika several times in the conversation wanted a sense of how to work with Washington -- he asked about the effectiveness of his ambassador in Washington, for example.

18. (C) Looking forward, as we think about how to improve relations with the Bouteflika government, we see a frail Algerian president whose health and term of office are uncertain. He wants better relations with the U.S., but his political weight within the system has limits and he cannot fix in any short term the bureaucratic failings of his government. Largely isolated in his big palace, Bouteflika appears to follow foreign policy events fairly closely, but he is not a creative thinker. We are thus left with the need to help the sclerotic Algerian state try to implement changes and reforms that can help it forestall even worse discontent on the streets here. We have to find those Algerian officials and private Algerians who can and will work with us in reform areas like economic and business climate, education, democratic processes and the judiciary. At best, the state here is inherently very risk-averse and cumbersome;

some elements are simply against more liberalization. Thus, reforms in whatever time is left for the Bouteflika government will be halting and always tenuous. When the issue is urgent and important enough to us, and we are blocked, we need to go around the mid- and upper bureaucratic levels and via a high-level message reach Bouteflika directly. This was the only way we may finally get movement on the GTMO issue, for example.

DAUGHTON